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Southern Baptists and Salvation: It's Time to Talk



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A recent statement on the doctrine of salvation has received a good bit of attention in recent days. Since it deals with matters of current controversy, it has generated some heat. Our current task as Southern Baptists is to engage in a theological conversation that will transform heat into light. This is the very least we owe each other as brothers and sisters who are committed to the Great Commission, to the Southern Baptist Convention, and to each other.



The document, identified as “A Statement of the Traditional Southern Baptist Understanding of God’s Plan of Salvation” was written and released by a group of Southern Baptists who clearly intend to make a theological argument. Their public action and serious intention should be welcomed. We should be glad that Southern Baptists are fully capable of engaging in a theological and biblical discussion over doctrine. Furthermore, we should be thankful that we are discussing God’s plan of salvation and the right way of understanding how God saved sinners. What could be more important?

First, we should pause to reflect that, thanks to the Conservative Resurgence in the Southern Baptist Convention, we are not debating the inerrancy of the Bible. That matter is settled among us. We are privileged to be having a debate among those who affirm the total

truthfulness and authority of the Bible. Otherwise, we would surely be debating the issues that have consumed the more liberal denominations, such as same-sex marriage, the ordination of practicing homosexuals to the ministry, and feminine God-language.

It is no small matter that Southern Baptists are discussing how best to speak of God's salvation, even as we are fully engaged in the task of reaching the nations with the Gospel of Christ. I am profoundly thankful that we are not a denomination that is arguing over the Great Commission, embarrassed by missions and evangelism. We can handle this current discussion, and we should actually be grateful for it.

Second, all Southern Baptists should affirm that those who drafted, released, and signed their names to this document had every right to do so. Furthermore, they have every right to hold conferences, publish materials, lead institutions, gather together, and to advocate for their beliefs and concerns in every appropriate way. We should welcome their serious concern and their willingness to speak openly and convictionally. I thank them for their willingness to put words to paper and then to thrust themselves into this kind of conversation.

Third, having published their statement, I am certain that the signatories expect a response to it. That response should be careful and measured, and it should focus on the substance of the document, and not on an attempt to question intentions. I know almost all who have signed this statement. I know that their intention is to serve the cause of Christ.

I wholeheartedly and emphatically agree with some of the statement's most important declarations, such as when it denies "that salvation is possible outside of a faith response to the Gospel of Jesus Christ" and when it affirms that "the Lord Jesus Christ commissioned His church to preach the good news of salvation to all people to the ends of the earth." I rejoice in its statement that "the proclamation of the Gospel is God's means of bringing any person to salvation." It is certainly correct in denying that any person is regenerated "apart from hearing and responding to the Gospel."

That said, I could not sign the document. Indeed, I have very serious reservations and concerns about some of its assertions and denials. I fully understand the intention of the drafters to oppose several Calvinist renderings of doctrine, but some of the language employed in the statement goes far beyond this intention. Some portions of the statement actually go beyond Arminianism and appear to affirm semi-Pelagian understandings of sin, human nature, and the human will — understandings that virtually all Southern Baptists have denied. Clearly, some Southern Baptists do not want to identify as either Calvinists, non-Calvinists, or Arminians. That is fine by me, but these theological issues have been debated by evangelicals for centuries now, and those labels stick for a reason.

That leads me to make another qualification. I do not believe that those most

problematic statements truly reflect the beliefs of many who signed this document. I know many of these men very well, and I know them to be doctrinally careful and theologically discerning. Some of these very men have served most boldly in the defense of the faith, and they have taught me much. We should be honored by the privilege of a serious theological conversation with one another, and we will all speak more carefully when we are respectfully questioned by those with whom we disagree.

Fourth, the last thing Southern Baptists need, now or ever, is the development of theological tribalism among us. We must all repent of the sin of building a tribe when we are called to serve the Kingdom of Christ. The more Calvinistic Southern Baptists, and here I include myself, are deeply theological and passionately concerned to get the Gospel right. The Calvinists I know are transforming their beliefs into an absolute renaissance of missionary commissionings and Gospel church planting. At times, however, Calvinists can be tribal and elitist, more concerned with counting points of doctrine and less concerned with pointing us all to the mission of the Gospel. Such a tribalism is inconsistent with the very beliefs we cherish. This goes to show that we, too, can be inconsistent in faith and practice. Of such tribalism we must all repent.

We should never apologize for attention to doctrine, especially when those doctrines reach the very heart of the Gospel. But tribalism, whether Calvinist or non-Calvinist, is an affront to the Gospel by which we have been saved and to the mission of the Great Commission that is entrusted to us. May God save us from dividing into tribes, even as we gladly and eagerly talk with one another about the doctrines we cherish, and especially when we discuss the doctrines on which we may disagree.

Fifth, we must recognize and affirm together that we have already stated where Southern Baptists stand on the great doctrines of our faith. The *Baptist Faith & Message* is our confession of faith, and it binds us all together on common ground. The BF&M does not state doctrines comprehensively, but it defines our necessary consensus. Every Southern Baptist is free to believe more than the confession affirms, but never less.

The *Baptist Faith & Message* includes majestic statements on salvation and the doctrines that we hold in common. The chairman of the committees who proposed the BF&M in 1925, 1963, and 2000 were Southern Baptist statesman-theologians who reflected and embraced the great doctrinal consensus that has marked Southern Baptists. E. Y. Mullins, Herschel H. Hobbs, and Adrian Rogers were statesmen, and their theological commitments were never tribal. The BF&M serves Southern Baptists as our confessional means of accountability and unity. Where it speaks, it speaks for us all.

This means that every single Southern Baptist should be ready to work gladly with every other Southern Baptist who stands within the *Baptist Faith & Message*. Both Calvinists and non-Calvinists have a legitimate claim to represent the “traditional” Southern Baptist

understanding. In truth, a look at the *Baptist Faith & Message* confirms that the Southern Baptist tradition includes both.

There is a lot for us to discuss, and plenty of time for that discussion. But that conversation must not immobilize us from standing together to reach the nations, nor lead us into tribalism. I love and respect the men who signed this new statement. I believe that they love and respect me. We have walked arm in arm for too long to abandon each other now. We need each other and, as some outsiders might say, we deserve each other.

The presence of more than one tradition and stream of doctrinal influence has been healthy for Southern Baptists. We have been strengthened by both the Charleston and Sandy Creek traditions, representing Southern Baptists who rightly prize their doctrinal understandings, but eagerly work together in the Gospel service. We should respect the need for churches, institutions, and denominational friends who represent these historic Southern Baptist traditions. We would not be who we are — or who God has called us to be — without each other. May God grant us grace to glorify Christ and edify the church as we talk about matters that mean so much to us. Let's be thankful for the conversation to which we are now called, and thankful for the brothers and sisters we are privileged to engage in this conversation.

And, above all, let us have this conversation as we devote ourselves unreservedly to do the work the churches of the Southern Baptist Convention have called us to do. Let's remember this — a lost world is waiting and a rising generation of Southern Baptists is watching.

I am always glad to hear from readers. Write me at mail@albertmohler.com. Follow regular updates on Twitter at www.twitter.com/

“[A Statement of the Traditional Southern Baptist Understanding of God’s Plan of Salvation](http://sbctoday.com/2012/05/30/an-introduction-to-”a-statement-of-the-traditional-southern-baptist-understanding-of-god’s-plan-of-salvation”/)” can be read [here](http://sbctoday.com/2012/05/30/an-introduction-to-”a-statement-of-the-traditional-southern-baptist-understanding-of-god’s-plan-of-salvation”/). <http://sbctoday.com/2012/05/30/an-introduction-to-”a-statement-of-the-traditional-southern-baptist-understanding-of-god’s-plan-of-salvation”/>

The *Baptist Faith & Message* can be read [here](http://www.sbc.net/bfm/bfm2000.asp): <http://www.sbc.net/bfm/bfm2000.asp>

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